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ABSTRACT

A study examined how college tutors make sense of tutoring sessions and how their analysis in turn influences their subsequent decisions and actions. Subjects were two tutors who were asked five questions over a period of two sequential tutoring sessions. One tutor realized that her goal was to help students earn better grades, that she managed the session, and, as a consequence, infrequently listened to the student. Another tutor revealed a very different approach to tutoring--she was conscious of her major tutoring construct (supporting her students to develop their voice) and could articulate it and demonstrate it in practice. The second tutor took the time to continually check with the student to determine that she understood what the student intended. Two questions remain: the role that voice plays in a tutor's primary tutoring constructs , and how a tutor's understanding of the importance of the development of a student writer's voice can be used in support of the tutor's work with student writers. (RS)

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Presenter: Dr. David C. Fletcher, Lehman College, CUNY
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As a director of a college writing center, I often wanted to assume that what took place between college tutors and student writers would always benefit students so that they became better writers. As a graduate student who tutored undergraduate students and graduate students, I also wanted to assume that my interactions and interventions would always support students to become more proficient writer. Tutors are ideally supposed to be helpful and to be serve as guides, models, coaches that lead, prompt, and gently push students to become more refined and articulate writers. In reality I know that many things took place, some beneficial to the writer and some not helpful nor supportive.

My interest in this study was directly related to the growing body of literature (Bissex and Bullock, 1987; Bullock, 1987; Daiker and Morenberg, 1990; Schön, 1987) that shows the benefits gained by teachers who transform themselves into teachers-as-researcher, reflecting on and critically examining their practices including those rules, assumptions and beliefs that might underlie those practices.

The reality of a tutoring session, as I discovered when I actually engaged in the reflective and analytical process when I examined a transcription of my tutoring session, clearly indicated to me that my own constructs, a major one of which I was not aware, influenced how I interacted with one writer (Fletcher, 1993). My first discovery in that analysis was that I continually asked the student questions that distracted her from her own intentions. Rather than listening to the

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student, I worked to take control of the session to gain clarification to my questions. About two-thirds into the session, because of the student's persistence in raising her own questions and concerns, I finally began to listen to what she was saying. My approach was tutor-centered, which included my taking charge, asking the lead questions, and make the decisions for the direction of the conference, in other words setting the agenda.

For these reasons, my interest in this research has developed out of a need to know more about how college tutors make sense of tutoring sessions and how their analysis in turn influences their subsequent decisions and actions. I am concerned because we may not always be serving student writers as well as we think we are. It seems clear that we have very little understanding of the ways in which tutors reflect, analyze, or come to make decisions about their tutoring practices.

Why reflection? According to Michael Polanyi (1975), a primary goal when we reflect is to make the tacit conscious and more obvious. With regard to tutoring, tutoring sessions must be recorded and transcribed so that a tutor's practices can be set at a necessary distance so they can be seen made conscious to ourselves and to others.

In this study I asked five questions of the tutors over a period of two sequential tutoring sessions:

1. What are the background experiences of the college tutor as a writer and tutor?
2. What actions and decisions does the tutor make during an initial tutoring session? (the session was tape-recorded and transcribed)
3. How does the tutor understand what transpired during the initial tutoring session? (by reading the transcription of the initial or first tutoring session)

4. How does the tutor explain the reasons for her actions and decisions taken during the first tutoring session?

5. How does the tutor plan to proceed during a second or subsequent tutoring session based on her reflections and analysis of the initial tutoring session?

In this presentation I would like to address two primary constructs that became evident as I considered these five questions with two college writing center tutors.

Evelyn: The tutor's goal in being a good tutor, in this instance helping students earn better grades, determined how the tutor managed the session and, as a consequence, infrequently listened to the student.

Evelyn, a tutor of one year, was a college senior, wrote only to complete college assignments. Writing was for her what she was required to do. It was during her reflection on her second tutoring session she came to the realization that she really wanted her student writers to receive the best grade possible.

> "I guess I wanted her to get a better grade. I guess you don't know when you shouldn't say some things and when you should. I guess I really wanted her to see it in a different way, maybe in the light that I was seeing it, but, also, in a sense, as a whole novel, not just separate parts. I guess I kind of got into it. I wanted her to get a really good grade. I guess, I kind of felt it would be a reflection on me, if she didn't do well."

To accomplish this goal, Evelyn tutoring style was tutor-centered, which allowed her to approach the student in very particular ways, including setting the agenda and controlling the session:

> It's just like a teacher, an instructor, or a professor has to take the initiative in terms of what's going to be done. You can't give students too many choices, (but) then a certain amount of choice is good (some hint of a conflict). You have to either agree or disagree with choices they've made or, somehow show guidance or give some sort of guidance to what they've (the student) decided.

In the session, it became evident rather quickly that Evelyn assumed it was her responsibility "to give or fill her student writers with a more experienced interpretation of the writing assignment and more complex ideas for the assignment. In her description of how she approached the student writer, Evelyn explained:

> First we go through the question or whatever the assignment was and then I have them express or explain what they think the assignment meant...what it is that was expected of them from the assignment or the question." Next, "I read what they have (written) and, you know, I suggest things."

In a later reflection on why she talked so much, Evelyn explained:

> I guess I wanted to be thorough, and I wanted to make sure that I was repeating a lot of things. What I really see was maybe (I) could just fill up two pages because I was being so repetitive. If you cut out all the things that I repeated, I guess I just wanted her to really understand the significance of it and, how important it was to say it or to use it in the paper, and that just to remember it. Because,... if you just hear something once and you hear it like really quickly, you're not going to remember, or your going to think maybe its not that important? Whereas if you hear it over and over again, and you hear it from beginning to end, like from the beginning of the session and then once again at the end of the session, then you realize that it should be somewhere in the paper. It should be incorporated."

However, one of the problems that Evelyn faced was that some of her student writers were not very talkative (Evelyn spoke about 90% of the actual time in the first transcribed session and about 80% in the second session with the same student) and so Evelyn had few clues to work with to understand the student's responses and reactions to what she had been saying. "Every once in a while she would nod and I think if she didn't understand, she would ask or would say something. And then she (the student writer) would interject sometimes and say something."

A second consequence to Evelyn's tutor-center style of tutoring was her desire that the

students use as much of what she had said as possible, without copying word per word, even though this might have been ok.

I didn't know how she was going to use it or whether or not she was actually going to quote me. But then if somebody tells me something that doesn't mean I necessarily use it, it's just like extraneous information. Or I'm giving her ideas, but it doesn't mean that she's always going to use (them). It's just like when you go to a library and you take out ten books, doesn't mean you're going to use every chapter or even every book.

Though finally, Evelyn was willing that her student writer use her ideas and does not really mind that students write then down.

I noticed she was like writing down my words, my exact words. And I don't ... want her to. I do want her to write, (but) I didn't want her to write my exact words, and then I know that she was. I just said, 'Oh, well you know, of course you have to put it into your own words.' But they don't. They don't. I don't think that they do that.... I don't even remember because I'm not going to see it, I guess, when she changes it, because I'm not going to see her before she revises it."

Evelyn's aim was to help the student earn a better grade, which included taking the initiative to understand the student's writing assignment, deciding how the tutoring session needed to proceed, determining the topics to be discussed, and determining whether to follow the student's initiated topics. She approached this problem by doing for the student what she had learned from her instructors as successful strategies applied to her own papers; why not, for Evelyn had earned A's and knew best.

A developing awareness: During her reflection of the first tutoring transcript, Evelyn began to question her tutoring style because she became aware that she actually talked most of the time by reading the transcript: "I was doing most of the talking ... so I wanted to get some feedback as to whether or not she understood what I was saying and she understood the novel." During the second tutoring session, Evelyn did speak less, speaking approximately 10% less than

in the first tutoring session. Yet within the first 10 minutes, Evelyn had returned to her familiar pattern. During the period of the study, Evelyn began tutoring in a class and noticed how the instructor prompted students to participate in discussions by asking them open-ended questions and allowing the students to answer these questions. Evelyn decided to attempt to incorporate this strategy into her tutoring practices in order to better prompt her students to talk more.

Denise: the tutor's major construct was to support her students to develop their voice.

Denise, a tutor of one year, revealed a very different approach to tutoring than Evelyn. And different from Evelyn, Denise was conscious of her major tutoring construct and could articulate it and demonstrate it in practice.

Gradual Development of Voice

Denise placed a great emphasis on being able to hear herself speak, that is hear her own voice, in her texts. Voice includes several components: what she thought, how she felt, and how she would like to be seen as a particular type of person. Denise would like the person who reads her papers to not mistake her for someone else but to recognize her as the person who wrote that particular paper.

When you're writing a paper you don't want to sound like someone else. If you're not sure of what you want say, you haven't found your own voice; you don't know how to express yourself that shows somewhat of who you are as a person and what you know. So now I'm, you know, I've found my voice in writing, and I don't sound like anyone else. When you read it, you can say, oh, this is what she think, this is what she feels. This must be somewhat of the type of person that she is. It won't give you a full view of who I am, but it'll give you an idea of the type of person that I am.

And to continue:

Voice also includes taking positions that she feels she can defend without equivocating. My style (is) the way I phrase. Like I said on the transfer placement test, they ask for your opinion, and when I give my opinion, and I support my opinion, you can see from that writing that either I really believe what I'm saying or I'm very wishy-washy about it. So I try not to write about things that I can't be strong on. I don't want to seem like I'm on the line."

Denise's efforts to discover her own voice goes a long way to help us understand her consistent pattern to allow students to speak, to ask questions, to read and hear their papers being read. As a result she tended the majority of the time to be student-centered and not tutor-centered, deliberately taking the students' experiences and knowledge into account.

She applied the same to her students:

A few of the students, they come in and they want me to tell them exactly what to write or, in a sense, they want me to write their paper. How would say it? Well, I would say it like this, but that's my voice. What would you say? What do you want to say? This is your paper. I try to get them to say it in their own words. I have a lot of students and they'll throw big words into the essay, and I'll say what does that mean? Oh, when I looked it up in the dictionary, I say, well, do you use that word in your everyday language? No, don't use it in your paper.... I tell them if you're not accustomed to using big words in your everyday life, don't use them in your papers. Because it's not going to sound genuine.

She however did not let this matter rest, but challenged her students to read and to read extensively.

As for herself, Denise wanted her students to become responsible for their writing and to take authority for what they had written. As different from Evelyn, Denise used what she had learned about writing in her own private efforts as a teenager in high school and as a college student to develop a real sense of voice, a concept Evelyn had not developed.

This difference helps to explain Denise's student-centered practices and Evelyn's tutor-centered practices.

Spends Most of the Time Talking About Meanings

Denise followed a very predictable pattern in responding to her own confusion and problems understanding her student writer's intended meanings. She allowed the student to read his paper and talked with the student about questions the student had brought to the session. Then she usually asked her own questions to clarify meaning. Denise would then talk through with the writer what he might have meant, concluding by telling the writer to try to put into writing what they have just discussed. Denise took the time to explain to the student writer why she could not understand his use of a specific word and does not fail to suggest to the writer that he should put into writing what he has said.

After a lengthy discussion of the term "latent" Denise challenged the writer:

Now, I know what "latent" means, because I've used it in sentences. I understand the context and how it use it.... And what you're saying is that it can cause serious problem when you just understand one definition... You know, you just read the definition and you think you know what it means. But you haven't used it in a sentence or you don't fully understand its context.

After the writer gave a more detailed explanation, Denise explicitly directed the writer. So then you should write that. You should say by using this interpretation or whatever you just explained to me. You should write it down in there." What was noticeable about Denise's practice with her student was that she was taking time to continually check with him to determine that she understands what he intended. For students who make a effort, Denise assumed and believed that her they had the capability to develop and improve their writing and she had herself.

Concluding question: We are left with two questions to consider: what role does the issue of <u>voice</u> play in a tutor's primary tutoring constructs and how can it be seen working in a

tutor's practices? and, how can we use a tutor's understanding of the importance of the development of a student writer's voice in supporting her work with a student writer?

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